LOVE'S COMPLEXITY

February 15, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Matthew 5:17-27

"You have heard that it was said. . .,'You shall not kill;. . .' But I say to you that everyone who is angry shall be liable to judgment."

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her." --Matthew 5:21,27 RSV

"That," the distinguished theologian, Emil Brunner, once said, "makes murderers and adulterers of us all." A friend of mine, as we worked through this passage in class, turned to me and cracked, a little less elegantly, "You might as well go ahead and do it if you're going to get blamed for it anyway."

Love's Complexity... - You don't have to come to church to hear that we are in the middle of a moral revolution. You really don't need the preacher to remind you that we have ridden out the ethical equivalent of a storm at sea, and have been deposited on the shores of a strange new land, with no map and no dependable road signs ahead, with only the memory of the maps and signs we used to have before the storm and with a kind of wistful, homesickness, longing that we could go back to that simpler time and place. You don't need to go to church to hear that. But the fact is that many people do go to church to hear that the old maps we used before the storm are really accurate and they will help us find our way through the new land if we pay careful enough attention to them even though the cartographers never saw this strange place.

There's a wonderful Woody Allen movie in the neighborhood, Radio Days, which is a delightful slice of life from the early 1940's: that is, before the moral revolution happened. The radio programs of that era provide the backdrop for a series of vignettes from a young boy's life in a family, synagogue, school and community. Those radio programs defined good and evil very clearly. The Second World War itself was a moral crusade on a grand scale, although Woody Allen can't resist demonstrating the moral ambiguity even in the midst of that clear cut conflict. The little boys are on the rooftop, full of patriotic zeal, with binoculars, watching for German bombers over the coast of New Jersey. What falls into their line of sight and rather commands their attention however, is a particularly attractive young woman seen through her bedroom window.

The movie is a gentle reminder of the fact that we are in a new and different place now. It is also a reminder that those of us who are middle-aged or older, formed our moral convictions and made our ethical assumptions in that time and place. The movie reminded me of an eloquent paragraph William Manchester wrote about the difference between that time and this time. It is in a memoir of his experience in the South Pacific as a young Marine in World War II. The title is Goodbye Darkness. Near the end he tells why it was important to him to get up out of a hospital bed to join his battalion on Okinawa, one of history's bloodiest and most hellish battles. On Easter Sunday, 1945 the Marines landed on an island sixty miles long and eight miles wide. Three months later 200,000 people were dead. Manchester tries to explain what that was about -- and in the process chronicles the moral revolution through which we have come.

> "Debt was ignoble. Courage was a virtue. Mothers were beloved, father obeyed. Marriage was a sacrament. Divorce was disgraceful. Pregnancy meant expulsion from school or dismissal from a job. The boys responsible for impregnation had to marry the girls -- there could be no wedding until the father approved. You assumed that gentlemen always stood and removed their hats when a lady entered the room. The suggestion that some of them might resent being called 'ladies' would have confounded you. You needed a precise relationship between the sexes, so that no one questioned the duty of boys to cross the seas and fight while girls wrote cheerful letters from home, girls you knew were still pure because they let you touch them here but not there, explaining that they were saving themselves for marriage. All these and 'God Bless America' and Christmas and the attitude that victory in the war would assure their continuance into perpetuity - all this led you into battle and sustained you as you fell, and, if it came to that, justified your death to all who loved you as you had loved them. Later the rules would change. But we didn't know that then, we didn't know." (Goodbye Darkness, p. 393-394)

The rules did change in our culture. More accurately, the culture itself started to change during that war and has been changing ever since. And an important part of living responsibly, as Christians, is to acknowledge the dramatic and profound nature of the changes and to try to deal creatively, Christianly with them.

Pining for the simplicity of the past is not going to help us make responsible ethical decisions. Rather, our task is to find within the resources of the faith, the principles, the guidelines, the general directions which will help us - and our world - in the future.

The issues which demand our attention would be simply incomprehensible a decade or more ago. Two of the most critical issues have to do with life threatening epidemics. A terminal, deadly disease, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, is loose among us. It is transmitted sexually. It affects homosexual and heterosexual people. The way people contract the disease offends conventional morality and so we don't talk

about it much in polite society, and certainly not in church in other than judgmental terms. Time Magazine equates it with the deadly plagues of the Middle Ages. Modest estimates are that it will become ten times worse before it gets better. That means many, many, many people are going to die of it. Our children, encouraged by our culture to establish casual intimate sexual relationships are going to get it, the doctors are telling us. In the meantime, incredibly, we are still debating whether or not products which will minimize the risk of contracting AIDS may be advertised on television. Words like propriety and taste are used to rationalize not including that advertising. Ponder the irony of people who engage in prime time erotic voyeurism on the major networks, paid for by American business, objecting to a commercial for a product that will prevent people from dying. What we have going of course is a profound inability to recognize that the storm has already happened, and we are, in fact, already standing on the shores of a new land, and the old maps don't apply. What we have, often, is religion - up to its old tricks, insisting that the old rules are still valid, that the old road map must be followed, even though we are standing on the edge of a new and uncharted wilderness.

Thank God for C. Everett Koop, the Surgeon General of the United States, a Presbyterian layman, a devout Christian, evangelical in fact, a political conservative, and the one man who has the courage to tell the truth and to point out the moral hypocrisy of the television networks and the religionists who support them.

The other deadly epidemic is teen-age pregnancy. You have read the numbers. Teen-age sexual activity is not much different in America from the other Western nations. Teen-aged pregnancy in America, however, is the highest in the world. It is increasing. And when it increases so does a whole sequence of societal tragedies with which the schools and courts and police and welfare system cannot begin to cope. The reason American teen-agers get pregnant is that they don't use birth control devices. And, one has to assume, at least part of the reason they don't use them is that it isn't always easy to get them. Our response to that tragedy is, as of last Wednesday, a Bill before Congress that would reduce even further, funding for family planning organizations. What we have going, again, is the cultural unwillingness or inability to acknowledge that we are in a new and dangerous place, supported by conservative religion.

Does traditional morality have anything to say about these new situations, other than "don't?" Jesus confronted that issue 2,000 years ago... In his culture, goodness, morality, righteousness, was defined by the law of Moses, the Ten Commandments, the First Five Books of the Bible and the Commentaries on the Law. The people who took the Law most seriously were the Scribes and Pharisees. They obeyed it to the letter. They organized their lives around it. They were good and admirable people. They are often demeaned and used as unflattering illustrations of mean, self-righteousness. Actually they were solid, good, moral people. I've always thought of them as the Presbyterians of their day...upright, generous, public-spirited, orderly, law-abiding people. They took the religious law - which was also the civil law in Israel, very seriously.

To them - for them - Jesus one time said - "I have not come to abolish the law. . . whoever does and teaches (the law) shall be called

great in the Kingdom of Heaven." And the Pharisees smiled and nodded their humble acknowledgment at the compliment he had paid them.

And then, in a reversal so stunning it is nearly incongruous, he added - "Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the Kingdom." The simple fact is that if righteousness means obeying the religious rules, you can't exceed the Scribes and Pharisees. You can't bat more than a thousand per cent. You can't refrain from stealing or murdering or committing adultery more than another person is refraining. The Scribes and Pharisees were the recognized moral superstars. You can't exceed them - unless - there is a new definition of righteousness, morality, a definition which is bigger than obeying the rules.

Jesus then used six examples: murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, retribution and love of neighbor. In each he used the formula: "You have heard that it was said - but I say to you." In each he refers to the old law, a moral rule; "thou shalt not kill," and then deepens it, probes beneath the surface, the behavior - to the very heart of the matter: "I say to you, everyone who is angry is liable to judgment."

Now it seems to me that one of the things we Christians ought to learn from our Lord is that when the Christian religion comes out as a set of rules it has missed the mark. It's not that the rules are bad, or harmful. In fact, sexually transmitted diseases are making the old rules look pretty good. It's just that rules often grow out of particular circumstances, and when the circumstances change, the rules aren't always quite as relevant, and if religion is merely a compilation of the old rules, it's not going to meet or help people where they are.

One New Testament commentator put it nicely. "If any criticism (of the Scribes and Pharisees) is to be made it is that they were too conscientious: that in their zeal for the minutest details of the Law and traditions they were apt to lose sight of the larger moral purposes which the law as a whole was meant to serve." (T. W. Manson, The Mission and Message of Jesus, p. 454) There's a wonderful line in the play The Elephant Man, when the Doctor has fired a hospital employee for staring at the Elephant Man, John Merrick. Merrick objects: the Doctor explains that the employee broke a rule which was established out of compassion for him, the Elephant Man. Merrick says: "If your mercy is so cruel, what do you do for justice?"

It's not that all the rules are irrelevant, nor that we have to be constantly improvising, accommodating and changing. It's just that the moral traditions, customs, laws are not an end in themselves. They are not Gospel. They are intended to reflect the Gospel.

That's first. The second point we Christians ought always to be learning from Jesus is that our lives are to be lived in a world he loved very much. That, in itself, is a basic moral posture. We thought about it last week as we looked at his metaphor of "The Salt of the Earth." Disciples are to live in the world which often means with moral ambiguity and complexity...We believe that our individual lives have had dignity and importance bestowed on them by him. We are, by his grace, responsible

citizens of this world. We are to be responsible for our lives and for the common life of the community. We are to be followers of Jesus, disciples of Jesus and to discipline our ethical decisions with our sense of his will. If there are no precise rules about "Baby M" and surrogate mothering, or the artificial prolongation of life or nuclear war, there are guidelines and values upon the basis of which we may make decisions: We must learn, out of our discipleship, the values taught by Jesus and then apply those values, responsibly and faithfully, to the new and complex moral dilemmas of our time. Jesus taught that people are more important than laws: that reconciliation between people is more important than the traditional religious custom of going to the Temple. Far better to stop - even on the way to Temple - to be reconciled with another person.

That's a value...people are important.

Children are important. Justice is important. The opportunity for every human life to grow and become all that it can become...that's a Christian value - on the basis of which we are called to make judgment calls.

The third thing we Christians should be learning from Jesus is that the righteousness he expects, the righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of Scribes and Pharisees, is a matter of heart and will and character. Jesus Christ wants, that is to say, more than our compliance with the rules; more than our behavior. It's not just a new law.

The fundamental moral question, William Willimon wrote recently is not "What should I do?" but "Who do I want to be?" Jesus Christ calls us, not simply to obey rules but to follow him, to be converted, changed, altered, to become new men and women. And that is a process, frankly, of making decisions, making mistakes, being forgiven and starting all over again.

The Sermon on the Mount, by equating anger with murder, and lust with adultery, makes murderers and adulterers out of us all, the famous theologian once observed. What it does, as well of course, is tell us that the life of discipleship depends on the grace and forgiveness of God. What it does, is point back to this haunting figure of Jesus who is not only a teacher of morality, but more importantly, a savior, one who himself shows an ultimate truth about God and God's way with us. Even these difficult moral imperatives, that is to say, are full of the grace of Jesus Christ.

There is a spiritual dynamic set off in our hearts by these hard moral demands... To consider them seriously - to ponder the meaning of being judged for my emotions - for what we have come to believe are involuntary and natural responses like anger and lust, is to despair. We are not up to this.

I recall very clearly that spiritual valley in my own pilgrimage. I despaired of myself - the church - or the world - ever approaching this moral utopianism. And I was saved from despair and the cynicism which results when I discovered something the late Reinhold Niebuhr wrote. He called the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount - "The Impossible Possibility." Niebuhr wrote..."The gospel is something more than the law of love. The gospel

deals with the fact that (people) violate the law of love. The gospel presents Christ as the pledge and revelation of God's mercy which finds (us) in our rebellion and overcomes (our) sin." (The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, p. 111, Why the Church is not Pacifist.)

Love gets complex at times. Now is one of them. Another bit of Niebuhrian advice that I try to remember at election time is that political and moral arguments are between sinners, not between righteous people and evil people, right people and wrong people.

Love gets complex. Doing the right thing assumes that we know what the right thing is, and that's not always as easy as it sounds. What the gospel of Christ promises is not easy answers, but human values which do not change and moral directions that must be expressed creatively and responsibly in every new age and every new land. More important, the Gospel is the Gospel...Good News about a Lord who will be with us, and his grace to forgive us when we make mistakes.

It is our vocation to live in a world and at a time that has become complex and sometimes very dangerous. We are called to live in our world, at this time, as Christ's faithful disciples. May we do so with confidence, not that we will always be right...but that he will always be with us; that as we struggle to apply his values, his will, to complex new situations, he will forgive us when we make mistakes, and renew us and send us back into the fray.

It is our privilege to be his people in complex times. May we do so with confidence - and courage - and cheerfulness.

Amen.

God of perfect love, we would do more in your
world than fulfill minimum moral requirements.
When we shrink from the complexity of the issues
which face us, push us back into their midst.
And equip us, O Lord, arm us, with that love
which will never let us go, in Jesus Christ
our Lord. Amen.